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# WHITE SLAVES IN AFRICA.

## A SAILOR'S STORY.

BY THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.

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THERE has come into my possession, among some old family papers, the authentic personal narrative, now about a century old, of one of the most picturesque and interesting explorers ever stranded from an American vessel on the desert coast of Africa. Becoming a captive alternatively of Moors and of negroes, and often changing masters, this man wandered on foot for nearly three years over a range of country then unexplored by white men, his footsteps extending more than a thousand miles and including that hitherto mysterious centre of African life, Timbuctoo. Ever since the sixteenth century, when Leo Africanus wrote his famous description of Africa, the tradition of this town had remained unconfirmed; and even Mungo Park, after reaching within fifteen days' journey of it, had left uncompleted the search in 1796 and died without the sight. It was in 1811 that it was first reached by the ignorant sailor whose narrative lies before me, dictated to a white friend, since he could neither read nor write. He had spent there nine months of his three years of African bondage, from which he was finally rescued by the combined action of the British and American consuls in the year 1812. After remaining for a time in Tangier, he went to Cadiz, and there became well known to an uncle of mine on my mother's side, Mr. Samuel Appleton Storrow, who was then travelling in that region and who was afterwards a citizen of Virginia, where he married into the well-known Carter family and held important public office at a later period. It is from his children that I have this manuscript. Storrow was interested, as were all who met this man, by his latent intelligence; so he wrote down with patience the narrative of an enslaved white man toiling over a half-desert Continent as a barefooted slave.

In later years the manuscript passed, somehow, through the hands of Jared Sparks, then Instructor in history in Harvard University, but not yet Professor, where it met the strange lot which was liable to befall the historic documents entrusted to that excellent man, and was dealt with as freely as were Washington's letters in the same hands, as will be remembered. The reprint of the manuscript, as it appeared in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for May and July, 1817, is so transformed as to be practically re-written; the sentences being rearranged and recombined, enlarged or contracted in a way common enough at that time among historians, from Bancroft downward, but now utterly discarded. Inasmuch as Sparks distrusted the sailor from the beginning, even upon statements since confirmed by later travellers, he had no inducement to be especially considerate, and he certainly was not.

The following parallel citation of the original manuscript and Sparks's modification will illustrate what I mean:

## SPARKS,

"Our voyage was sufficiently favourable till the eleventh of October, when, being on the coast of Africa, as I think, near Cape Noon, in latitude about twenty-eight, the vessel stranded on a reef of rocks, projecting out from the continent."

"Being apprehensive that the ship herself might share the same fate, we threw ourselves into the water in order to swim to the land. We had no sooner reached the shore, than we were seized and made prisoners by a party of wandering Arabs, who had discovered us at a distance, and waited our approach. They rushed upon us, while we were yet in the water, and each one claimed as his own property the person, whom he had taken. We made some struggle, but without avail."

## MANUSCRIPT.

"In the prosecution of this voyage nothing of moment occurred until the 11th of October, at which time being on the coast of Africa &, as I imagine, in the vicinity of Cape Noon, in latitude near 28, the vessel stranded on a reef of rocks running out from the Continent."

"Being apprehensive that the ship herself might share the same fate we threw ourselves into the water in order to swim to land, immediately on reaching which we were seized & made prisoners by a party of wandering Arabs, who had discerned us from a distance & awaited our approach. We were taken with some considerable struggle, each person seized falling to the lot of the seizer;—while yet in the water they rushed upon us, seized us by the hair & contended among themselves to gain & continue possession."

## NARRATIVE.

"On the seventh day of May in the year 1810 sailed from New York for Gibraltar, the Ship "Charles," John Norton, Captain—in which I embarked as a common sailor—our complement was as follows, viz.:

John Norton—Master	James Davidson—Seaman
Stephen Dalby—Mate	Thomas Williams— "
Martin Clark—black man—cook	John Matthews— "
Unus—Newsom—Seaman	Nicholas — — " a Swede
Robert Adams— "	— Nielson— " — " &

Mr Peter Bogandus, supercargo. On the 12th of June we arrived at Gibraltar & remained there untill the middle of September, when we sailed for the Cape de Verde Islands with the same complement—the supercargo excepted. In the prosecution of this voyage nothing of moment occurred until the 11th of October, at which time, being on the coast of Africa &, as I imagine, in the vicinity of Cape Noon, in latitude near 28, the vessel stranded on a reef of rocks running out from the Continent. This disaster happened at about 6 o'clock in the morning, the darkness of the previous night & the haziness of the weather at the moment preventing us from knowing our nearness to the shore.

"The boats were immediately hoisted out but were dashed in pieces from the violence of the waves. Being apprehensive that the ship herself might share the same fate, we threw ourselves into the water in order to swim to land, immediately on reaching which we were seized & made prisoners by a party of wandering Arabs, who had discerned us from a distance and awaited our approach. We were taken with some considerable struggle, each person seized falling to the lot of the seizer; while yet in the water they rushed upon us, seized us by the hair & contended among themselves to gain & continue possession. The succeeding day, the 12th of October, the wind & sea abating—so that the vessel was left dry on the rocks,—the Arabs went on board, plundered her of everything worth taking & afterwards burnt her. Having done this, they made a distribution of us in lots, on which Dalby [mate of the vessel] & myself fell to the share of the same person. They had previously stripped us of our cloaths & we were compelled to follow them in their desultory wandering mode of life, entirely naked. They belonged to a wandering tribe in the interior & had now come, to the number of 30 or 40, to the sea coast to procure a miserable subsistence on fish. They seemed to have no object excepting that of mere existence & were most abjectedly wretched. We continued this sort of life roving from place to place along the shore for the space of a month—suffering excessively from the heat of the day & dews of the night, hunger & exhaustion; from the combined effect of which the Captain died. This took place while we were in our accustomed motion & gave the Arabs not the least thought or uneasiness—they threw the body on one side & there would have left it, had we not begged permission to bury it in the sand.

"After the above mentioned term had elapsed, the party separated

in order to go to their several places of rendezvous in the interior, taking with them their slaves. Myself & Dalby followed our master to a place in the district of Woled doleim, where was the encampment of the rest of his tribe. Our direction was South East,—easterly,—we travelled about ——— days over a sandy country, & after passing about eighty miles arrived at the rendezvous—it was merely a small cluster of tents, containing perhaps 200 people. It was chosen as a place of encampment from the soil affording some little shrubbery & one or two wells of brackish water. Everything discovered their poverty, filth, ignorance & abject misery—they had some few camels & Jackasses, which it was my duty to attend; our food (Dalby & myself) consisted of a scanty allowance of barley flour & water, their own of the same with an occasional addition of camel's milk.

“After having remained in this place about two months (it being then to the best of my recollection the latter part of the month of January 1811), I found a party formed to proceed to a place called Soudeny for the purpose of stealing Negroes. This party consisted of about thirty, myself included—they were armed with short daggers, mounted on camels & supplied with Barley flour & Water as our only food. On leaving Woled Doleim we moved south east southerly, which direction we pursued untill the end of the journey; our way laid over a country entirely sandy, which afforded water, but in one instance & that when the soil had slightly changed its character from sandy to rocky, it was bitter & slimy. After having proceeded in this manner for eighteen days, at an average pace of about fifteen miles per day, we arrived at the mountains in the vicinity of Soudeny. These mountains are of Rock & Sand & in them we hid ourselves untill opportunity should offer to seize such Negroes as might be wandering that way.

“Thirteen days we remained in our concealment without effecting anything; on the fourteenth day the people of the town, becoming apprised of our nearness, came out in a body, attacked & made prisoners of our whole party & marched us into their settlement. Immediately after our seizure the Natives seemed aware of the existence of a difference between me & my masters, which they discovered by beating & maltreating them & leaving me untouched. For the first night we were all put into the same prison & in the morning myself alone released from it—the rest remained in strict confinement during the whole of our short stay in the place.

“The soil of the vicinity of the Soudanee was very much better than that we had passed over in our journey towards it—the town itself appeared to consist of thirty or forty scattered mud houses or rather huts containing perhaps 400 or 500 Inhabitants, who hold themselves subject to the king or Wooloo of Timbuctoo. They had several springs of good water, some vegetation & some little cultivation. I observed Date Trees, & another tree bearing a large & pleasant fruit—the name of which I did not learn—likewise guinea corn, Beans, Barley, a species of Artichoke & a small black grain called in their language *Moutre*. The place & its Inhabitants were dirty & miserable, but not to so great

an extent as were the Arabs—the children were generally naked—people of full age had a sort of cloathing in the form of a shirt, made of Wool & goats' hair, dyed blue—their arms were bows & arrows & I observed they were all marked by three scores on each cheek. I saw among them Horses, Cows, Goats, Sheep, Jackasses, Dogs, Dromedaries & Camels, all excepting the two latter animals were weak & miserable. This was the extent of the observation I was enabled to make in so short a stay, which was but a single day—at the end of which our whole party was ordered to Timbuctoo & thither proceeded under a guard of forty Negroes armed with bows & arrows. Our course was South East, which direction we continued for ten days at the rate of nearly twenty miles per day—our only rests were for a short time in the day—and in the night for sleep & food, which latter consisted of Moutre formed into a kind of Pudding & occasionally a few Ostrich Eggs, having met with the bird in our march. Our way lay over a country uneven in its face, & varying as to soil, sometimes affording shrubbery & sometimes sandy, in no part offering water or showing any marks of human existence or cultivated vegetable life. During the whole of this time my former masters were pinioned & closely guarded—I was left at large & walked in company with the Negroes or occasionally rested myself by mounting one of the camels. At the end of the tenth day we arrived at a miserable village of about fifteen mud huts, as many tents & perhaps 200 or 300 Inhabitants, who were the first human creatures we had seen since quitting Soudeny. They were naked & apparently much more abjectly miserable than the People of Soudeny,—they were distinguished by the loss of the cartilage of the nose & were not (as told me by the Arabs) subject to the Wooloo of Timbuctoo.

“Our stay there was but a day, after which we continued our march in the same direction, & after advancing for the space of two days arrived at a country materially better than the preceding. On proceeding farther the face of the country gradually ameliorated, offering frequent springs of good water, occasional villages, a better soil & a portion of cultivation.

“During the course of the fifth & sixth days the change was very material; we passed several villages, the Inhabitants of which seemed to enjoy some of the apparent comforts of life; everything seemed to denote a condition superior to that of any country through which I had hitherto passed. At the end of the sixth day our caravan arrived at its point of destination, the city of Timbuctoo—immediately on which myself & companions were thrown into prison, where I remained but for one night; the others did not leave it untill leaving the city. Having resided in this place, as will appear by the sequel, for a considerable length of time, & having had ample opportunity to ascertain, as far as lay within my own talent, the appearance of the city & customs, laws, commerce & resources of its Inhabitants, I will here narrate them faithfully—as they present themselves to my remembrance.

“Timbuctoo is built at the distance of about two hundred yards from

a river called by the natives Laparsire, & consists of probably not less than twelve thousand Inhabitants living in mud houses & generally enjoying a greater share of the comforts & necessities of life than any other part of Africa that had at that time come under my observation. The houses, which are irregularly scattered over a space of [blank] acres, are not badly built—they are from thirty to seventy feet square, single storied & flat roofed—the sides are raised & supported without wood, being a cement composed of mud & straw. The partitions within are of the same, the rafters supporting the roof, which is of the like composition, are of the Date tree—in the whole fabric no use is made of Irons—each house has its apertures serving as windows without shutters. There appears no external difference between the different houses except in that of the Wooloo, which is more distinguished by its size than by any other quality. The Inhabitants are in air, shape & appearance very little different from those Africans commonly seen in Europe or America, excepting that their skins are of a more unvarying & deeper black; the same shape of legs & of features of the face with a general addiction to corpulency—particularly among the females. Their dress is the same among all ranks, with the slight difference that the shirt, the only garment worn, is among the poorer class blue, among the higher white; this article is occasionally manufactured of wool & goats' hair among themselves & occasionally bought of traders visiting the city from distant parts—some few wear a sort of slipper made of goat's or other skin. . . .

“In idleness of the most abject sort passed away the nine months spent in Timbuctoo, during which I generally received from the Natives that negative sort of kindness which their natures allowed them to give, but which, had it been superior, would have been embittered by the idea which always oppressed me, that I was never again to see my native country.

“At the end of the ninth month, a party of Moorish traders purchased of the Wooloo the whole party which had been taken prisoners at Soudeny, for the amount of sixteen pounds of tobacco per man, the Moors, their countrymen, were bought to be restored to freedom and myself to my former condition as their slave.

“In the early part of the month of December, 1811 (as nearly as I could imagine), our caravan left Timbuctoo—it consisted of fifteen camels & about fifty persons, comprising the purchasers, purchased, myself & a few Negro slaves. Our destination was Taudeny, to arrive at which we pursued two different directions, the one angular to the other. In the first eight days we followed the course of the river, which was due East, leading us over a good country, partially cultivated & interspersed with occasional settlements, the Inhabitants of which were employed in the same sort of agriculture as those of Timbuctoo. During this time we moved at the rate of 16 or 17 miles per day & had consequently ascended the river to the extent of 130 or 140 miles, yet even at that point the diminution in width & depth was not sufficient to induce a belief that double or treble that distance would

reach to its source. At the end of the 8th day we halted at a small village of huts about two miles distant from the river; & as from this place we were to take a new direction & change a comparatively hospitable country for a waste of sand, we remained in it four days to refresh the camels by grazing & prepare them for the labor they were about to undertake.

"At the expiration of our term of rest the caravan resumed its march in a direction, as nearly as my recollection serves, about North, north west, having the river directly in the rear. Settlements & cultivation seemed to be confined to a narrow district bordering on the river—for immediately on quitting it every trace of animal or vegetable life disappeared; we immediately entered on an immense waste of sand, equally hostile to the one & the other—it afforded no water nor, with the exception of a very little burnt shrubbery on which the camels sometimes browsed, did we find anything, in our journey from the River to Taudeny, connected with existence or the common means of preserving it. My sole subsistence was a scanty portion of barley & water taken once a day—that of my masters was but little beyond it. The heat of the sun & of the sand, exhaustion from lack of food & from labor, rendered me in a short time unable to walk—when absolutely unable to move I was allowed to relieve myself for a short time by mounting one of the camels. At the end of the fourth day a negro child, slave to the caravan, died of hunger, thirst & fatigue;—immediately on its death its body was thrown away without the least regard. . . . On the course of the march one of the camels died of exhaustion; a portion of his flesh served us for food. In this manner did we continue our journey, in the direction originally assumed, for the term of ten days—going each day at a rate of 12 or 14 miles—when at the end of the tenth we arrived at Taudeny, of which we were a little apprised by an elevation of the ground & a slight amelioration of the soil.

"Taudeny is a miserable village of 50 or 60 huts containing apparently about 600 Inhabitants, including Strangers, of whom many resort there in Caravans for purposes of trade. The traffic is considerable, it being a rendezvous from many different places. It is governed, as I understood, by a Sheik appointed by the Wooloo of Timbuctoo to whom the place is tributary, & must have been selected as a place of settlement from its soil being better than the deserts of sand which surround it & affording one or two springs of good water—it likewise contains Salt Mines. In every respect, except the difference of size, Taudeny is the same as Timbuctoo—in manners, refinement & comfort there was no apparent difference. My masters being engaged in traffic we remained in this place four days, during which I was employed in attending the camels & preparing them for the labor they had yet to undertake. At the commencement of the 5th day our caravan renewed its march, with a destination as I understood for Heligobla. On leaving Taudeny we pursued a North west course & immediately entered on a plain of burning sand—of a character still more horrid



than that we had passed. The allotted time for the journey being twelve days, we had placed on the camels twelve skins of water (goat skins)—one for each day—but on the second after our departure had the misfortune to burst two of them, in consequence of which we were obliged to diminish our miserable allowance & to mix it, small as it was, with the urine of the camels.

“Throughout the ten first days of this journey nothing could exceed the extent of the sufferings of myself & fellow slaves from heat, hunger, thirst & exhaustion. At the first dawn of light, the caravan commenced its march—the Moors having previously made their morning devotions—throughout the day our motion continued—at the setting of the sun we halted & received our scanty allowance of food. After this we stretched ourselves on the sand to sleep—to effect which we were always obliged to remove the upper body [garment]—the daily power of the sun impregnating it with such an excessive heat as to prevent the least repose if laying upon it. During the day the Moors directed their course by the Sun;—in this dreary waste, where nothing of vegetable or animal life appears, where the eye rests but on the sky above it & an ocean of sand about it, nothing but the Sun remains by which a daily course & direction can be observed.

“On the fourth day one of the Jackasses, which had been purchased at Taudeny, died of thirst & exhaustion, not having tasted water since leaving that place; we ate nearly all his flesh on the night of his death. On the seventh day died two negro boys, slaves brought from Timbuctoo, their privations, sufferings & death were the same as those of the woman & child before mentioned. On the eighth day died one of our Camels, who had been without water since leaving Taudeny.

“On the tenth day of this horrid existence, when nature seemed to be sinking within me, our eyes were greeted by the distant view of a change of soil, a rising ground & some little verdure. On reaching it we were partially relieved from the heat of the sand, & on the eleventh after passing a few tents regaled ourselves at a spring of good water. No one, who has not experienced like miseries, can realize the comfort which we at that moment received! On the twelfth day we reached Heligobla, the point of our destination. On arrival there I found that, on quitting Taudeny, we had left the whole of the negro territory & were now in the country of the wandering & most savage Moors.

“Heligobla is, like many other encampments of this sort of people, not a place of fixed residence, but merely a well round which tents are pitched; when the herbage in the neighborhood is exhausted by the animals grazing upon it, the tribe migrates to some little distance; when the same takes place in the spot to which they are now removed, they change to another, keeping themselves always in the vicinity of the well. The tribe consisted of about 200 persons—men, women & children inclusive, inhabiting 30 or 40 tents—they are Mahometans & as strict in religious duties as in Tangier or elsewhere. They have but little cloathing & that tattered & filthy—their faces are nearly black, their Hair long & of the same color, their faces & persons squalid

& dirty, & their customs & manners of the most brutal & cruel sort. They do not cultivate the ground but subsist entirely on dates & the milk & occasionally (tho' very rarely) the flesh of camels & goats, of which they rear a great number & occasionally sell them to the passing caravans. They are self governed, being commanded by a Shiek from their own number; their language is Arabick. In everything that is desirable, in all the necessities & comforts of life, in civilization & humanity, they are much inferior to the negroes of Timbuctoo & elsewhere.

"After fourteen days' stay in this unhappy spot, I found that my master had sold me to the Shiek of the place for two camels & two bags of dates. The caravan moved onward & left me with my new master—in whose service I immediately commenced my labors, which consisted in attending & serving the camels & goats. In this employment was I confined six months without comfort & without change; my food, which consisted of goat's milk and water, was given me in a scanty allowance twice a day—my labor was incessant & unaccompanied by kindness or commiseration. The people seemed to consider injury to me as a benefit to themselves, for I received from them nothing but continued beating & insult; among their own number they were apparently satisfied with their miserable life & occasionally merry; to slaves of all descriptions they were morose & severe, but to Christians in particular they seemed most wretchedly cruel. After enduring this sad existence for the space of six months I was sold by the Shiek to one of a Caravan of Woledabusbak traders passing thro' Heligobla on their way to Lagassa (or Heligassa). I immediately commenced the journey with them to the place of their destination—the course was north west, westerly, which we continued for fifteen days at the rate of [blank] or [blank] miles per day—passing over a country infinitely better than the sandy desert from Taudeny to Heligobla—the ground was uneven, occasionally covered with low shrubbery & affording water in one or two places. We met with one or two Moorish encampments, & at the end of the fifteenth day arrived at Lagassa. This place is in every respect resembling Heligobla; the same selection of a spot in consequence of its affording water, the same migration round it, the same habits & mode of life, the same destitution of good feeling & principle are in common to them both. . . . This was the first people among whom I found (since my captivity) silver & gold known as a circulating medium—this was the result of their connexion with Traders from Wadnoon & its vicinity.

"After having remained in this place for the space of two days I was sold to a Shiek of Wadnoon for the sum of 60 dollars & immediately followed my new master to the district to which he belonged. Our course was north east, northerly, which we continued for fifteen days moving very slowly & occasionally stopping for purposes of trade. . . . We passed several encampments & met many travellers. I likewise observed several small flocks of Deer & Antelopes—at the end of the fifteenth day we arrived at Wadnoon. Nothing could exceed my sur-

prise when on entering this place I found there four of the crew of the 'Charles'—prisoners like myself. The reason of their all being centered here, although their original destination was different, was the importance & wealth of the city of Wadnoon, which made it a rendezvous for slaves from many quarters. . . .

"In this place I remained, together with my fellow slaves, for twelve months, subject throughout to the same master that had brought me thither; my employment was labor in the gardens & fields, eating once & sometimes twice a day of barley & water & dates—but of this so scantily as to oblige me for the mere support of nature to steal everything like food, which I could lay my hands on—not however without fear of punishment, under which in blows & abuse I suffered daily. During the course of this time, four months after my arrival, Dalby, the former mate of the 'Charles,' who was slave to the son of my master, finding himself exhausted by labor & privation, declared himself unable to perform some duty which was assigned to him; at this his master became exasperated, & stabbed him with his dagger so that he died almost immediately. To protect his wretched remains from the dogs myself & the rest of my fellow slaves buried him—under the sad idea that any one of us might for the same slight provocation share the same fate.

"A few months afterwards my three surviving fellow prisoners, becoming exhausted under incessant beating, insult & privation, declared their intention of escaping them by becoming Mahometans—which unhappy determination they put into effect & were consequently circumcised and placed on the same footing as the people of the country. After this my life became doubly wretched; my master, being desirous that I should follow the example of the others in the change of religion, endeavoured to prevail upon me so to do by continued persuasion & the most abusive and insupportable treatment. So severe was it that my nature must have sunk under it, had not at the end of one or two months a person appeared empowered by the consuls of the United States & of Great Britain at Mogadore to purchase such Christians as might be found in that district. After some length of time spent in bargaining, I found to my unspeakable delight that the purchase of me was effected for the sum of \$105 & myself at liberty to pursue my journey with the purchaser to Mogadore. The sad resolution taken by my fellow captives prevented them from sharing with me this happiness. After one year's miserable residence at Wadnoon I commenced my journey to Mogadore in company with my purchaser & after five days' march in a West, north west direction, making a distance of about 150 miles over a country resembling that of the vicinity of Wadnoon, arrived at Santa Cruz, or as it is called by the Moors Agadeer, on the sea coast—from thence I walked on the sea shore three days—at the end of which, in the latter part of the month of August of the year 1812, I arrived at Mogadore.

Of the later history of this poor American seaman, it is only

known that he went finally from Cadiz to London, where he at first appeared almost as a beggar and afterwards became temporarily a hero, with eminent scholars and public men to hear and applaud his reminiscences. In telling his story over and over again, a year or two later, he undoubtedly made unconscious variations, as all illiterate men are liable to do. His story was told and retold, culminating in a large quarto book entitled "The Narrative of Robert Adams, a Sailor, who was Wrecked on the Western Coast of Africa in the Year 1810, was Detained Three Years in Slavery by the Arabs of the Great Desert, and Resided several Months in the City of Timbuctoo." The preface to the printed book is dated April 30th, 1816, this being two years later than that of the manuscript now before me, which was written out in 1814 by Mr. Storrow. It certainly is not strange that variations would have been made in so long a narrative after an interval of nearly two years; but, as to main facts, the tale has borne the test of time and will remain as a graphic testimony to the earliest condition of Western Africa.

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.